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ABSTRACT

Born in Sweden in 1929, Claes Oldenburg was brought to the United States as an infant and raised in Chicago (Illinois). Oldenburg came of age artistically in the early 1960s with the pop art generation. Throughout his career, he has demonstrated the power of the imagination to transform the everyday environment. This teaching guide gives an overview of Claes Oldenburg's life and career, focusing on "metamorphosis" as a key element in his sculpture. The guide discusses one of Oldenburg's monumental sculptures, the "Geometric Mouse." It points out that, like many artists of the modern era, Oldenburg has done much to extend the definition of art by challenging traditional assumptions. The guide provides 15 photographs of Claes Oldenburg's sculptures and suggests activities for elementary school, middle school, and high school. (BT)

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Claes Oldenburg: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

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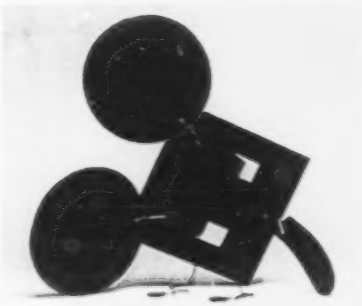

Claes Oldenburg, Geometric Mouse--Scale C, 1971

A Guide for Teachers

F. P. Smith

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Claes Oldenburg: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

Teacher's Guide

This teaching guide was prepared by Julie Springer, Coordinator of Teacher Programs, Education Division, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Additional information is available on the National Gallery's web site at **http://www.nga.gov**

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Claes Oldenburg: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

I make my work out of my everyday experiences, which I find as perplexing and extraordinary as can be.
--Claes Oldenburg

Throughout his career Claes Oldenburg has demonstrated the power of the imagination to transform the everyday environment. Drawing inspiration from the ubiquitous and the mundane, he has created artworks of varying scale and media that astonish with their wit, humor, and metaphoric associations.

About the Artist

Born in Sweden in 1929, Claes Oldenburg was brought to America as an infant and raised in Chicago. After graduating from Yale and working as a newspaper reporter, he studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1956 he moved to New York City, where he became acquainted with a group of artists who were involved in staging improvised theatrical performances known as "happenings." These performances anticipated Oldenburg's later sculpture in their references to everyday life and emphasis on visual and spatial relationships.

Oldenburg came of age artistically in the early 1960s with the pop art generation. Because of his use of imagery from American consumer culture Oldenburg has often been associated with the pop art movement. The humor that infuses his art sometimes whimsical, often brash also links him to the pop art sensibility which challenged prevailing notions that the content of art was by definition profound, and its maker profoundly earnest.

Oldenburg's approach differs from that of pop artists like Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein; his idiosyncratic approach to his subjects stems in part from his affinities to the earlier movements of dada and surrealism. While Warhol would retain and even flaunt the manufactured identity of an object, Oldenburg transforms it through a process of visual free-association. To this day Oldenburg continues to use familiar objects to delve beneath surface appearances in search of what he has called "parallel realities," or the multiple identities a form can take on through changes of material, scale, or physical setting.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis, or the transformation from one thing into another, is a key element in Oldenburg's work. He delights in taking something hard-edged and geometric and making it into something pliable and organic--or vice versa.

His first soft sculpture of everyday objects, which included toilets, fans, and other

household fixtures, was fashioned out of canvas and stuffed with the silky fiber kapok. The unexpected effects of gravity caused many of these creations to sag, giving them vulnerable and lifelike overtones. Thus, Oldenburg's art confounds expectations not only through transformations of material, but also by animating the inanimate.

Metamorphosis through a change of scale has fascinated the artist since the early sixties. In 1965, he began making drawings for colossal monuments; they were proposals for sculpture representing everyday objects enlarged to gargantuan proportions. Oldenburg employed the term "monument" ironically, since his non-heroic subjects deliberately subvert traditional notions of public sculpture. Some of Oldenburg's large-scale projects began to be realized in 1969, when he moved his studio to an old factory building in New Haven, Connecticut, close to the fabricating plant Lippincott and Company, which specialized in working with artists.

The Geometric Mouse

One of Oldenburg's first monumental sculptures was the Geometric Mouse, ultimately created in five scales, ranging from the X (ear diameter 9') to the D (ear diameter 6"). Scale C is a tabletop version with jointed ears (diameter 9"), eyelids, and nose, that enable the mouse head to be positioned in different ways.

Oldenburg's New Haven studio was home to a sizeable mouse population; thus, the artist quipped, "a rodent subject was unavoidable." But the motif actually emerged in the early sixties as a mouse mask for a performance called Moveyhouse.

After a visit to the Disney studios in Los Angeles in 1968, the artist returned to the motif making a series of sketches, and later, lithographs that show the Geometric Mouse in various incarnations. These studies clearly demonstrate the artist's metamorphic process as he generates new ideas from a single subject. Oldenburg's comments on this image shed further light on his process of visual free association:

"Mickey Mouse, as form, is important in the American range of forms. The mouse's personality or nostalgia need not be discussed. The form may derive from the early film camera and that is how I arrived at this version wherein the 'eyes' operate as shutters, represented by old-fashioned window shades. Such shades never quite roll up, which accounts for the sleepy look."

This geometrical mouse was first used as a mask in a performance and then proposed as a façade for the contemporary art museum in Chicago. In Oldenburg's print Notes of 1968 the mouse appears as a hilltop sculpture, as a city park (the eyes serving as swimming pools), and as a floating sculpture. If the Mouse were placed over Hollywood, it might suffer the same fate, in time, as the famous giant letters and fall on its face.

The associations don't end there. The Geometric Mouse is elsewhere likened in Oldenburg's sketches to a Good Humor ice cream bar with a bite out of the upper

corner, a double light-switch plate, a three-way plug, and even his own face.

Elemental Form

As rich as these associations are, Oldenburg's sculpture also functions as pure form. Visual interest emerges from the bold interplay of the elemental lines and shapes that comprise the Geometric Mouse, which changes character according to the way its various parts are positioned. When set in the basic position (a position that is fixed at the larger scales of X and A), the sculpture exists at its most abstract and can be read largely as a series of pristine circles and rectangles. Because it is totally black, the Scale C version lacks any sensation of depth, reinforcing the sculpture's linear and planar qualities. The chains that droop from the mouse's eyelids introduce a soft and fluid linear element as they pool on the floor and wend their way to the anchor-like "tear disks." The linear flow and fall of the chain can also be manipulated and reconfigured at will, since it is the one piece of the sculpture that moves with relative independence from the other parts.

Points to Consider

Like many artists of the modern era, Oldenburg has done much to extend the definition of art by challenging traditional assumptions. Do you share his belief that humor has a legitimate, indeed, vital role to play in art? Do his whimsical subjects belong in the arena of civic art or monumental sculpture? Or, as detractors might claim, does he trivialize the very notion of monumental art by proposing a mouse head as a colossal sculpture? How do the artist's fantastic transformations of ordinary objects, through changes of scale and material, affect the way we perceive the real thing? Can Oldenburg's work affect the way we perceive our everyday world?

Claes Oldenburg: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

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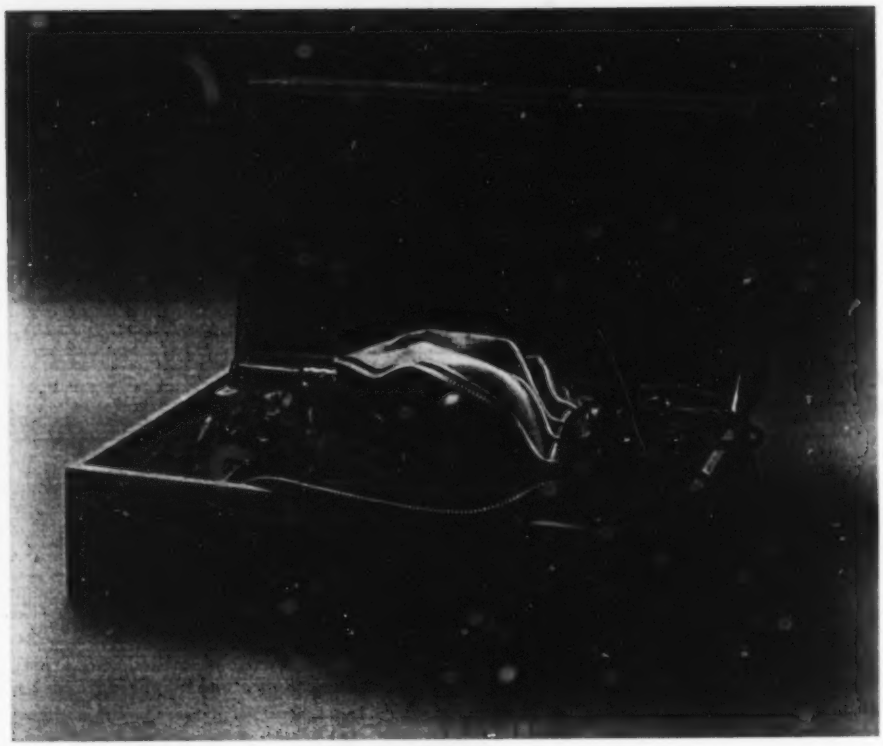

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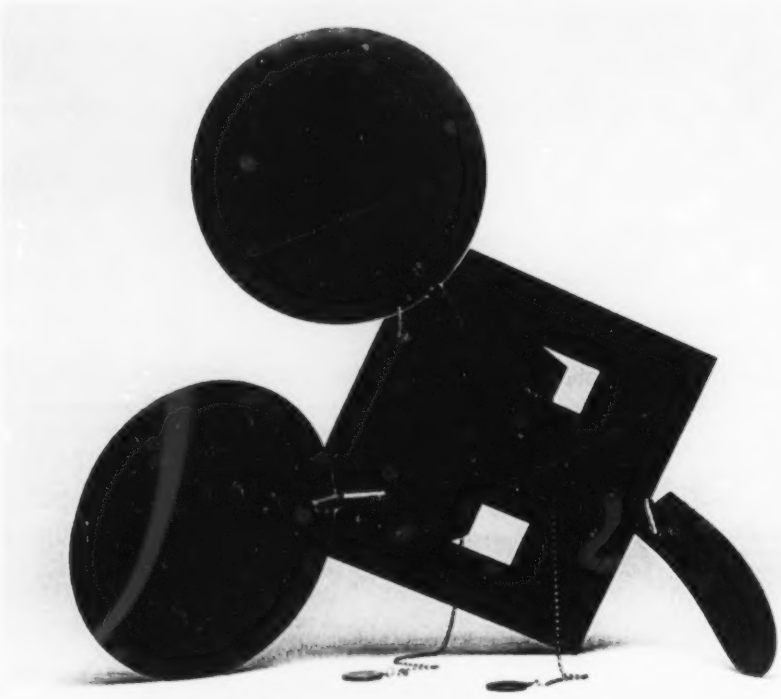

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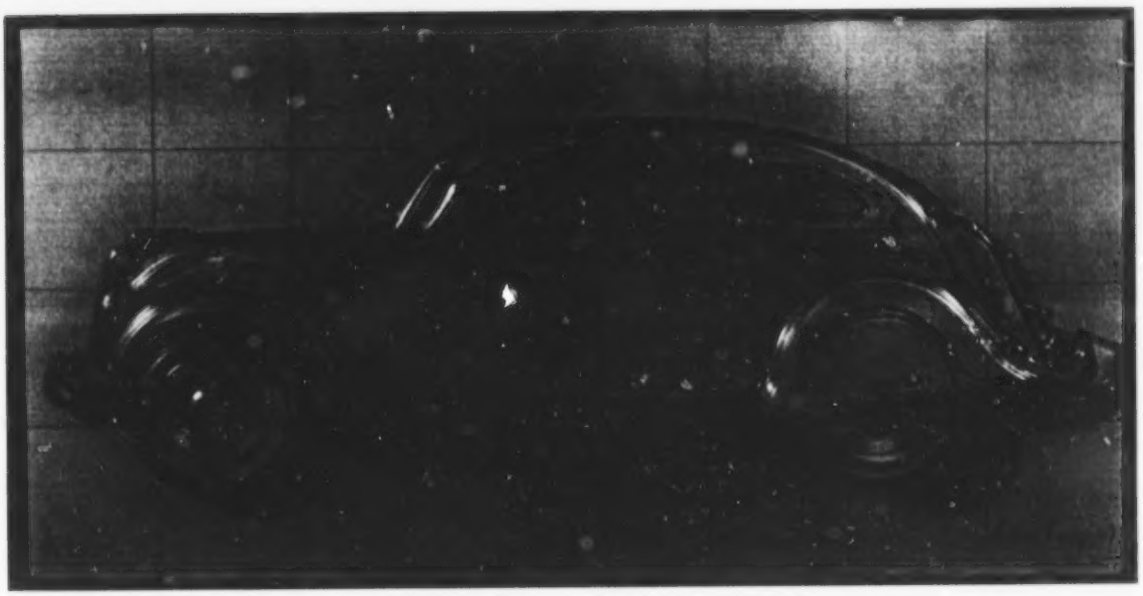

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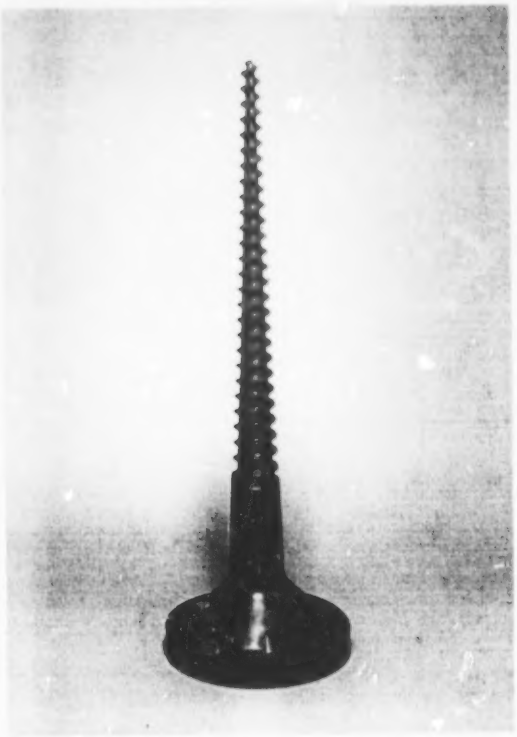

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Captions

1. Arched Soft Screw as Building, published 1976, lithograph (aluminum) in black on roll Arches paper, 1981.5.130
2. The Letter Q as Beach House, with Sailboat, published 1972, 15-color lithograph (aluminum) on Arjomari paper, 1981.5.72
3. Notes (Ice Cream Cones), published 1968, 11-color lithograph (aluminum) with embossing on Rives BFK paper, 1981.5.121
4. Soft Screw as Balloon, Ascending, published 1976, lithograph (aluminum) in black on roll Arches paper, 1981.5.228
5. Soft Screw in Waterfall, published 1976, lithograph (aluminum) in black on Roll Arches paper, 1986.90.25
6. Double-Nose/Purse/Punching Bag/Ashtray, published 1970, cowhide, reversible zipper, bronze, redwood box (with screenprinted image inside lid), redwood chips, stamped wooden discs, and deerskin-covered book, 1981.5.120
7. Geometric Mouse - Scale C, published 1971, black anodized aluminum with steel pins,1981.5.227
8. Glass Case with Pies (Assorted Pies in a Case), 1962, burlap soaked in plaster, painted with enamel, with pie tins, in glass-and-metal case, 1991.54.1
9. Ice Bag--Scale B, published 1971, programmed kinetic sculpture, yellow nylon material, fiberglass, and mechanical movement, 1981.5.139
10. Profile Airflow, published 1969, molded polyurethane over 2-color lithograph (aluminum) on Special Arjomari paper, 1981.5.70
11. Profiterole, 1990, cast aluminum, hand-painted by artist, 1990.104.17
12. Soft Screw, published 1976, cast elastomeric urethane with a mahogany base, 1981.5.133
13. Soft Drainpipe - Red (Hot) Version, 1967, vinyl lined with canvas, filled with expanded polystyrene chips, on painted metal stand, 1990.75.1
14. Study for Profiterole, 1989, acrylic paint on plaster, styrofoam, and paper, 1994.68.1
15. Typewriter Eraser, Scale X, model 1998, fabricated 1999, stainless steel and cement painted with acrylic urethane, 1998.150.1

ACTIVITIES

Elementary

After looking at the many versions of Geometric Mouse, act out a short skit that brings the mouse to life. What would the mouse say if it could talk? Would it have a high-pitched voice like the Disney character's? If you were to pick a creature or character to be the subject of a whimsical sculpture or public monument, who/what would it be? Try drawing it.

Middle School

Assemble a group of random objects to consider as models for transformation into a large-scale sculpture or monument. Paying close attention to the essential properties of each object, experiment in your mind's eye or with a sketch pad by changing the scale or the materials of the object. Which object might have a "parallel reality" as a bridge, a tunnel, or a building, simply by enlarging it to a colossal scale? If you choose to design a civic monument, create one in which the symbolic content alludes to its designated site (i.e., a candy bar for Hershey, Pennsylvania).

High School

Design your own building façade based on some motif from popular culture. Just as Oldenburg allowed the mouse's tongue and eyes to function as a doorway and windows, seek to incorporate such "parallel realities" in your own design. For an additional challenge, make the plan of your building echo, or relate to the shape of the façade, or incorporate regional symbolism into your building design.

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Claes Oldenburg: Multiples in Retrospect: 1964-1990, 1991, pg. 112

Resources

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Claes Oldenburg: Multiples in Retrospect, 1964-1900 (Introduction by Thomas Lawson), New York: Rizzoli, 1991.

Claes Oldenburg. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970. (Text by Oldenburg and Barbara Rose).